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Sabotage Derails Iraqi Oil Supply

Pipeline Blown Up Days After Opening

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BAGHDAD, Aug. 16 -- Iraq's just-renewed oil exports came to a halt today, a U.S.-appointed Iraqi administrator said, after saboteurs blew up the main pipeline to Turkey overnight, crushing hopes that revenue from the country's most valuable asset would begin to pour in again.

The pipeline that runs from oil fields near Kirkuk was opened only three days ago. Saboteurs set off explosives along a section of the 46-inch diameter pipe near the town of Baiji, 120 miles northwest of Baghdad, said the acting oil minister, Thamir Ghabban. The attack will cost Iraq \$7 million a day in lost crude oil earnings.

"You can imagine, I am not pleased," Ghabban said in an interview. "This is leading to a loss of income we are in dire need of."

It was at least the third time that the Kirkuk line, which ends at the Turkish Mediterranean seaport of Ceyhan, has been hit by saboteurs. Attackers have managed to damage the pipeline at critical moments since the U.S. occupation. In June, explosives ruptured the line a day after contracts were signed for renewed exports from Iraq through Turkey. Explosives also have damaged a pipeline that feeds the Daura refinery in southern Baghdad and one that leads from oil fields near Basra to the southern Persian Gulf terminal of Mina al-Bakr.

"What is definite is that someone is trying to stop petroleum from reaching Daura and the export market," Ghabban said.

The repeat acts of sabotage reflect postwar Iraq's lack of security and vulnerability to petroleum pipeline disruptions and electric power supply stoppages. Electrical lines in several regions have been stripped of wire by looters who smuggle the copper out of the country. There have been attacks on transformers in several towns, interrupting already unsteady power supplies.

The Baiji area is part of a region that once formed a bedrock of support for deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and has become the site of most attacks on U.S. occupation forces. Today, A U.S. soldier was wounded by guerrillas who fired rocket-propelled grenades at a convoy in Baqubah, 30 miles northeast of Baghdad. Baqubah is also part of the largely Sunni Muslim region.

Ghabban, appointed by U.S. occupation authorities, indicated that U.S. forces are insufficient in number to protect Iraq's vital lifelines. Under Hussein, he said, oil pipelines were protected by a multilayered force of special oil police, the army and internal security forces working with regional tribes. "All that has disappeared," he said. "There is a void."

Ghabban added that he has been pressing officials with the U.S.-created Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA, which runs the country, to increase security along the pipelines, but without success. "This is beyond the resources of the oil ministry. It's the CPA's responsibility," he said. "I've been talking about it for the past three months."

As a kind of stopgap, police Brig. Gen. Ahmed Ibrahim, the newly appointed deputy interior minister, made a public appeal to clan leaders, who are all but sovereign in some regions of Iraq, to defend the pipeline. "I ask the heads of the tribes that control the area where the pipelines pass to protect them," he told reporters in Baghdad. "If there is an explosion, the heads of tribes know about it. They know who committed this act. Tribes should communicate the information they have."

He called the suspected saboteurs "hopeless conspirators."

U.S. military officials said that Iraqi firefighters and U.S. soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division extinguished the fire this afternoon. It was left to burn for several hours to permit spilled oil to burn off the ground. It will take several days to repair the pipeline, U.S. officials said.

Lt. Col. William MacDonald, a 4th Infantry Division spokesman, told reporters in Tikrit, just south of Baiji, that there had been two other efforts to damage the pipeline in recent days. "There were two cases of unexploded bombs that were found near the pipeline," he said.

U.S. officials expected the pipeline to carry about half a million barrels a day from the Kirkuk fields by year's end. When the route opened, it carried 250,000 barrels daily. Exports from Basra through the Persian Gulf were expected to reach about 600,000 barrels daily this month, but electrical problems have kept the flow irregular.

Uncertainty about when and how much Iraqi crude would go to the tight global market has kept recent petroleum prices at about \$30 a barrel. Although OPEC, the cartel of major oil producers, has set \$25 a barrel as the optimal price for crude, members recently declined to increase production.

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